Feminist Voices : Quest for Identity in the Selected Novels of Anuradha Roy, Taslima Nasrin and Kamila Shamsie With Special Reference to : *All The Lives We Never Lived (2017) Sleeping On Jupiter (2015) The Folded Earth (2011)French Lover (2002) Shodh (2003) Lajja (1993) Home Fire (2017) Burnt Shadows (2009) Broken Verses (2005)*

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Synopsis

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You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise. (21-24)

-Maya Angelou's *Still Rise*

Let people judge her, let obstacles come her way and let her life be a series of adversities, she is gradually overcoming all and will rise above all the muddle in her life: Women of the twentieth century have stepped towards their emancipation from all kinds of shackles.

Women were and will continue to be in trap of the social, cultural, political, psychological and intellectual subjugation, at various steps in their lives, without having an opportunity to venture into some other area of their choice. Women have been confined to four walls. Patriarchy, religion and many prejudices still hold back women to chart out a path for themselves. Women are on a voyage to shift their path from being victims to agents by overcoming the fetters that force them to remain subjugated and not allow them to live as individual beings.

Issues related to women's plight have continued to be the concern of many female writers all across the world. But, the twentieth century is loaded with writers who took initiative to end gender discrimination from all the spheres. A small step, an outburst of their hidden voices, their inner turbulence, slowly became a movement big enough to fight for the equality of sexes.

Genres such as Poetry, Non-fiction, Drama and Fiction have expressed the condition of women in general and in context to different cultures. However, fiction as a genre, is broad enough to express particular issues more appropriately and in much detail. Women novelists like Jane Austen in the late eighteenth, Bronte Sisters in the nineteenth and Virginia Woolf in the twentieth century have reflected the problems faced by women of the West, in their own unique style and ways.

Each society sets certain norms that have to be followed and through those norms and behaviour people are adjudged according to their gender. The social constructs have played a significant role in creating the image of women in the Indian society.

The status and condition of women in India, has undergone many changes in the past. Women occupied a higher status and respectable position in the Vedic period. No discrimination was made on the basis of education. Gargi and Maitreyi were the leading philosophers of that time. Girls were allowed to settle in marriage with their own choice. This is, perhaps an indicator of high status of women in the Vedic times. Gradually, it changed while stepping into the Post Vedic Period. *The Ramayana* fairly outlines that the husband is indeed a deity for the wife which indicated the lower status of women.

In India, evil practices such as *Sati*, *Purdah system*, child marriage, polygamy, etc. have been dominant on the women and they were also expected to fulfill the duties of being the care takers. They were ignored regarding their individuality. After the Vedic period the age of marriage for girls lowered to 9 or 10 years.

The position of women had steadily degraded till 1800 A.D. i.e. for about two thousand years. However, during the 19th century, some of the reformists took the initiative to abolish the evil practices of the society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy stood against *Sati* system; Ishvar Chandra Vidhyasagar fought for women's education and widow remarriage; Swami Dayanand advocated abolition of child marriage; and many such reformists took initiate to work for the betterment of women in society.

The struggle for independence witnessed the role of women who came forward to follow Mahatma Gandhi. Despite being subjugated they began to recognize their potential. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Savitribhai Phule, Tarabai Shinde etc. fought in the movement of freedom struggle and contributed as powerful leaders.

As women never received their own real position, the question of gender equity still rises in the twenty first century and will continue to rise again and again until equality of

gender will not be followed practically. Women are struggling to create assertive identities for themselves, so that they can acquire social acceptance of feelings, desires and lifestyles.

Likewise, we can witness the deteriorating condition of women in two major Muslim Nations, i.e. Pakistan and Bangladesh. The irony of Islam, the common religious faith, is that although its sacred text, the Quran, is concerned of women's well-being and development, yet the Islamic traditions discriminate against girls from the moment of their births. Evil practices such as Triple *talaq(*divorce), *Purdah(*keeping women isolated at home), *Halaala*, honor killing, polygamy etc. have subjugated women physically and psychologically.

Males and females were being divided into productive and reproductive categories which restricted women to take part in any kind of decision making. They were expected to be only involved in child bearing, house cleaning and obeying their male counterparts. Lack of education and lack of decision making became a barrier to improve women's sexual and reproductive health. We may claim that now the condition has been transformed but it still varies in urban and rural places.

However, promising writers are emerging to bring out the stark status and condition of women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These thoughts and ideologies have been fairly reflected in the writings of the feminist writers. In India, writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy- all have tried to elevate the cause of feminism. In Bangladesh, writers like Tehmina Anam, Iffat Ara, Purabi Basu, Begum Rokeya, Taslima Nasrin and many others have hoisted the flag of feminism with a loud note. The condition of women in Pakistan can be very easily traced by the contribution of works done by writers such as Tehmina Durrani, Bapsi Sidhwa, Fahmida Riaz, Kamila Shamsie and many such women writers. These women are not confined to any particular socio-economic segment or any rural urban divide. They have suffered in the hands of violent perpetrators mainly due to social and political reasons.

From the womb to the tomb, a woman's life is a series of trials which are destined for her. In a male dominated society, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are the attributes that a woman is expected to possess. In the words of Mary Ann Fergusson, '*... in every age woman has been seen primarily as a mother, wife, mistress and as a sex object- their roles in relationship to men.'* It is a fact that women are psychologically gendered as a part of who they are. Societal idea of gender bias is stuffed right into our heads and it divides the world into males and females, strong and weak, oppressor and oppressed. Also, one of the most embedded obstacle in achieving women's liberation has been, the ideologies in the form of religion. Religion, has intensified the predicament of women around the world.

Optimistically, a new era of transition has stepped in, that promises to bring a havoc of change and greater role played by a woman. Politically and intellectually she is almost on the verge of attaining freedom and equality, and she is fast becoming a force, emotionally also, to reckon with. Along with political and intellectual liberty, women are much in need to attain psychological one. Women are in a quest for individual identity and are trying hard to build their own identity.

According to a social psychologist, Peter Weinreich, identity is

> **a structural representation of the individual's existential experience, in which the relationships between self and other agents are organized in relatively stable structures of time… with the emphasis in the socio-cultural milieu in which self relates to other agents and institution. (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2003, p1).**

Social identity integrates personal self with the outside world. It attempts to deal with the issue of self at both the individual cognitive level and that of the collective behaviour. Identity relating to gender or an individual refers to an awareness of the self and the assimilation of an individual's cognitive, emotional and social experiences. Psychologically, it investigates self-image, concerned with one's inner model of oneself, individuality and self-worth.

Emerging novelists from the three main South-Asian countries deal with the women's quest for identity in their own subtle, bold and intriguing way. Some of these novelists are: Anuradha Roy from India, Taslima Nasrin from Bangladesh and Kamila Shamsie from Pakistan.

Born in 1967, Anuradha Roy is an Indian novelist, grown up mainly in Hyderabad, India. Writer of four novels, *An Atlas of Impossible Longings(2008), The Folded Earth(2011), Sleeping On Jupiter(2015) and All The Lives We Never Lived(2017),* she is best known for her Man Booker Prize longlisted novel *Sleeping on Jupiter(2014)* and also for having won the DSC Prize for South-Asian Literature. Her debut novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing,* with its intensive storytelling instantly won the readers' hearts all over the world, and the novel was picked among the best books of that year.

Anuradha Roy, being a dauntless media commentator, seems perturbed by the political conditions of her country which can be seen in her works. It might lead one to expect that her works would be polemical, but she has the art to weave fierce violence in a breathlessly beautiful setting. After her father's death, she has experienced personally in her home, how noxious the society is, towards the widows. Gradually she could feel it in her bones, the cruelties of organized religion. She said in one of her interviews, that she often puts herself into the skins of her characters in order to feel their pain, in order to make them real.

Her novels debate around multiple themes such as child sexual abuse, rise of religious aggression, loss of self, violence, fluidity of the past and subjugation of women and her emancipation. Her novels, in a subtle manner, glint as a narrative which secretly portray some visceral part of her mind and events that had hit her hard in her life.

This study would be based on Roy's three novels, namely *The Folded Earth(2011), Sleeping on Jupiter(2015)* and *All The Lives We Never Lived(2017).*

All The Lives We Never Lived (2017), has been longlisted for DSC Prize for South-Asian Literature, 2018. The book deals with history and memory, and intermingling of

fictional and non-fictional characters. It poignantly tries to bring out the suppressed frustrations and the complex subtleties related to a woman's deplorable life. This novel describes a mother's efforts to create her own dissident life in a restrictive society. Gayatri, mother of a nine year old boy left her family to live her life on her own terms, thus rising above the conventional norms of the society.

Sleeping On Jupiter (2015) was her third novel and it was longlisted for The Man Booker Prize 2015. Roy through this courageous book, dealt with the subject of violence against women in the most unexpected walls. Seven-year-old Nomita, the protagonist, witnessed the murder of her father, loss of her brother and abandonment from her mother, all in the course of a couple of days. Later in an orphanage, owned by a renowned spiritual Guru, she was sexually abused and those memories haunted her even when she had moved to Norway. But all these bitter memories never resulted in her downfall rather she came back to that place as a filmmaker's assistant to tie up the loose ends, being a survivor of entrenched evil, that can be only escaped.

The Folded Earth (2011) reflects the theme of how a woman after suffering to the core, decides to move towards her freedom and independence from the shackles of a patriarchal setup. The novel beautifully portrays how does Maya, the protagonist, after being disinherited by her industrialist father for marrying a Christian and after her husband's death, sets a perfect and an isolated life for herself.

Born in 1962, Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi author, who works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought and equality for women, and human rights by campaigning, lecturing and publishing. A writer of huge corpus of works in the genre of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, she has been called as 'An Angry Young Woman' by Annanda Shankar Ray. (Bengali poet and essayist.)

She has lived in exile since 1994 after an order was passed against her, for her arrest on the charges of criticizing Islam. Her ferocious charge is against sexual exploitation,

marriage, Islam's treatment of women and the human's rights. Her writings are polemical and explicitly stand against the wrong without any fear.

Nasrin strikes a loud note to assert her female characters' rights in a patently unjust society based on the patriarchal philosophy. Her experiences that were witnessed from her very home and from women around her, gave her a blow to stand for women's rights and human rights in general.

This study would predominantly be based on Nasrin's three novels, namely *Lajja(1993), French Lover (2002) and Shodh (2003).*

Lajja(1993) is set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, which had strong religious, political and social repercussions and resulting in the riots through the subcontinent. The novel *Lajja* depicts how the aftermaths of demolition of Babri Masjid affected the lives of Hindus living in Bangladesh. The novel very accurately portrays the anguish and pain of the Hindus, who were the victims of these riots. How were the women being marginalized doubly, first on the religious grounds and second on their gender identity, is another crucial theme of the novel.

French Lover(2002) is a fascinating glimpse into the working of a woman's mind as she struggles to come to terms with her identity in a hostile world. Nilanjana, emerges as a strong protagonist and by breaking all the shackles of partriarchal setup, decides to live peacefully and independently in the end of the novel.

Shodh (2003) preoccupies the mind of Nasrin by the theme of gender bias which eventually results in psychological trauma culminating in revenge. She seeks to revolutionize the concept of love and marriage in the so called elite yet tradition-bound society. Nasrin through this novel tries to make people aware of the significance of love, benevolence and harmony being important for the growth and peace in human's life.

Born in 1973, Kamila Shamsie, a British-Pakistani writer, grew up in Karachi, a city that is an overwhelming presence in her first four novels. She has written seven novels and a Non-fiction work, *Offence: The Muslim Case*. Shamsie is best known for her award winning novel *Home Fire*. It won the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 and was longlisted for Man Booker Prize 2017. Being a diasporic writer, she never wrote about Pakistan with a distant view, but as an insider's eye.

Her works debate around the communal tensions and how they affect the lives of ordinary Muslims. She centers her focus in understanding the contemporary concepts of alienation, pride and identity. Her stories are ingrained with rich undertone particularly in the context of communal unrest and occupy the reader's mind to the arduous realities of characters closely knitted into the politics of the times.

In reality too, Shamsie is outspoken about her support of women authors and their works. In 2015, she knocked the gender bias which she had witnessed in the literary world and called for a personal dedicated year of publishing only works by women, in order to make people realize the worth of women writers. Dealing with communal unrest in most of her novels she skillfully brings out the underneath turbulence faced by women due to the tensions in the political background and how do they overcome the same.

This study would be based on Shamsie's three novels, namely *Broken Verses(2005), Burnt Shadows(2009) and Home Fire(2017).*

Broken Verses (2005) focuses on the life of a 31-year-old Aasmani Inqalab, who was traumatized by her mother, Samina Akram's intrigue disappearance 14 years ago. Trying to come in terms with the loss of her mother and slightly earlier death of her mother's lover, a revolutionary poet Nazim, the novel foregrounds ideas of carving the protagonist's identity and to build a new narrative self for her that may be able to work through the traumatic demands of the past.

Burnt Shadows (2009) portrays the journey of Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese girl, survivor of the 1945 Nagasaki Bombing. She had also witnessed the India- Pakistan Partition, the Afgan War, nuclear tensions in Asia and 9/11 Bombing, yet managed to hold on to humanity after such mass destruction that affected her psychologically and physically. It is a story which juxtaposes the massacre in human history and personal loss and sorrow.

Home Fire (2017) is her seventh novel which reworks Sophocles' Greek Classical tragedy *Antigone*. Entrapped in taking charge of her siblings after the death of her Jihadist father, Isma pursues her deferred dream and left for America leaving behind her twin sister Aneeka and her brother Parvaiz. Aneeka, the beating heart of the novel faced a dilemma, similar to that of Antigone. Shamsie explores woman's freedom within Islam. Most of the novel's characters fall on the side of 'stop shaming women who wear hijabs'.

The literature review reveals that most of the researches have focused primarily on thematic concerns of the novels of Taslima Nasrin. For instance**,** Karnataka University has conducted a research on *The Theme of Protest in Taslima Nasrin's Fiction: Shame and French Lover*. Sneh Lata Sharma in her topic of Research Article entitled *Thematic Concerns in Taslima Nasreen's Major Novels* talk generally about themes that Nasrin has covered in her novels. R**.** Vanitha in her research topic entitled *Women as Avatar Overcoming Maroon Existent in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin, Bapsi Sidhwa and Shobha De,* has explored the theme of power that a women possesses under her docile image. Sri Venkateshwar University conducted a research on *A Study of Themes and Techniques of the Women Novelists of Commonwealth Literature with special reference to the Novels of Yasmine Gooneratne, Taslima Nasrin and Arundhati Roy***.** Lovely Professional University conducted a research entitled *The Impact of Colliding Cultures and Displacement Reading of the Selected Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Monica Ali, Taslima Nasrin and Khaled Hosseni,* dealing with the theme of migration, exile and multiculturalism etc.

In a research paper entitled *Sexual Violence in the Spiritual Sanctuary: A Study of Anuradha Roy's Sleeping on Jupiter(2015)* Dr. N. Velmani studies the novel in the light of how do women encounter sexual violence in the most unexpected walls. In a research article entitled *An Ecofeminist Reading of Anuradha Roy's Folded Earth*(2018) Sanjukta Bala explores the theme of women and nature, in a way connected, as oppressed beings by the patriarchy and the capitalist attitude of the dominant world order. In the research paper *Reflection of Nostalgia From Nuance in Anuradha Roy's Folded Earth(2016)* Sanjay Zagade studies how in a very subtle manner, past memories obstruct a woman in moving towards her independent life by trapping her in isolation. A research paper by Shailendra P. Singh, entitled *An Eco-Critical Reading of Anuradha Roy's All the Lives We Never Lived(2019* examines the novel in the light of how it is connected to nature. A research article entitled *A Feminist Reading of Anuradha Roy's All The Lives We Never Lived(2019)* examines the novel in the light of oppressive nature of patriarchy and how do the women characters in the novel refuse to be subjugated by these forces.

Aligarh Muslim University conducted a research entitled *Novels of Kamila Shamsie: A Study in Themes and Techniques* which critically examines the themes and techniques used in her novels. In a research work *A Literary Exploration of Urban Pakistani Society with special reference to Fiction by Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie*, Devan Rangani studies the social, political and historical explorations with special reference to two major Pakistani writers. In a research paper entitled *Fear of Small Numbers: Re-Visioning History in Broken Verses,* Khamsa Qasim explores the narrow definition of Nationalism during Zia-Ul-Haq's regime and an insight into the true histories of violence committed against women.

The present study marks a point of departure from the above seminal works and shifts the attention to a Comparative Study of Anuradha Roy, Taslima Nasrin and Kamila Shamsie, representative female authors from the three main South-Asian countries, that would compare and analyze the female characters who rose above the struggle in their own powerful ways. Thus, the literature review reflects that the selected three writers and their works in the

proposed study have not been compared or worked on up till now. The novels of these writers render immense scope to view the characters struggling and coming out of the turmoil they are facing in their social, political, psychological and intellectual lives. It would further contrast the literary and stylistic techniques of these novelists. This study attempts a comparative analysis of the women novelists of different nationalities and an altogether different way of writing and dealing with the quest for identity of the women, in each one of them. It would be enlightening to study and analyze these selected novels, in which some of them focus on different themes, with an underneath turbulence faced by the women characters. It will unravel various struggles that a woman faces in her life, within all the spheres, and how easily they are being targeted everywhere.

The Objectives for the proposed study will be:

1. To study the socio-political factors that led to the subjugation of women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh;
2. To examine the projection of the plight of women by the three novelists;
3. To trace the growth of women and their quest for identity in the selected novels;
4. To compare the female characters and their journey towards emancipation in the selected novels;
5. To critically examine the narrative techniques used by the three novelists.

The tentative chapter division is:

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 2 - From Fragmentation to Wholeness: A Study of Women's Assertion of Selfhood in the Selected Novels of Anuradha Roy

Chapter 3 - Towards Emancipation: A Feminist Study of the Characters in the Selected Novels of Kamila Shamsie

Chapter 4- Breaking the Shackles: An Analysis of the Female Characters in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin

Chapter 5- The Art of the Narrative

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

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